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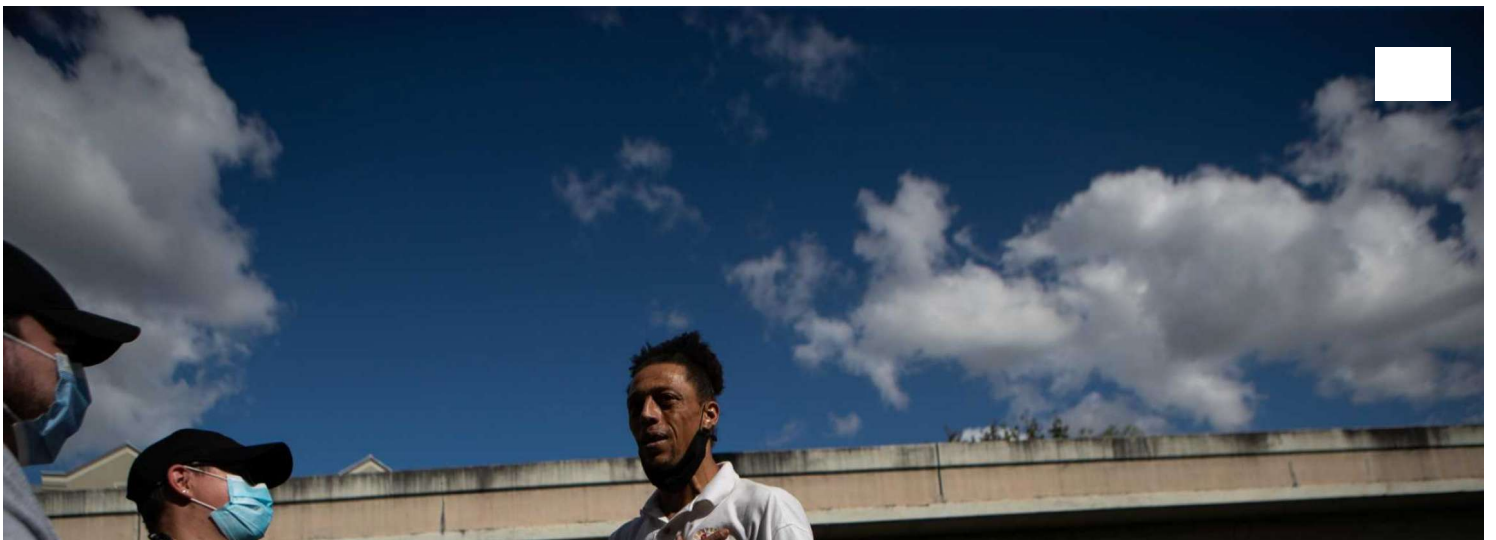
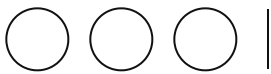
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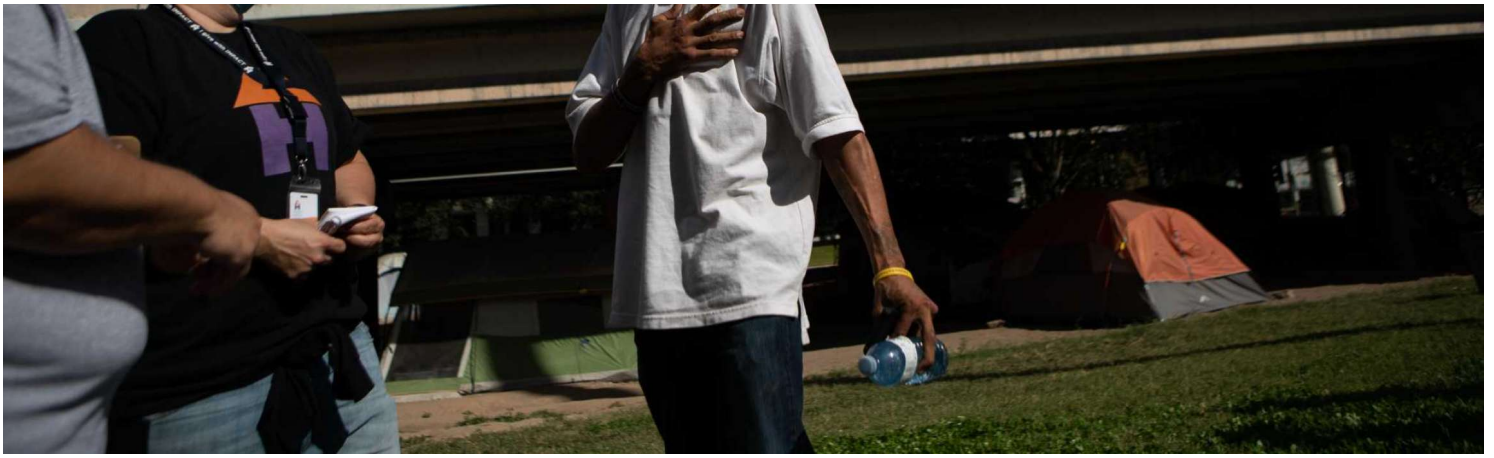
As homeless camps around Houston are 'decommissioned,' other U.S. cities look to copy the strategy



R.A. Schuetz, Staff writer

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Steven Dennis, who is unhoused, expresses gratitude for the opportunity to be provided with the tools to get an apartment lease with the help of organizations like BakerRipley and the Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County, Tuesday, Nov. 16, 2021, in Houston. A white canopy with tables and folding chairs were set up for housing advocates to talk to the people living in tents beneath I-45.

Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

At the southern corner of downtown, underneath the tangle of freeways where I-45 meets I-69, Monday night was filled with quiet anticipation. Housing was coming.

In the encampment called home by roughly three dozen, Steven Dennis couldn't sleep. Regina Tut talked of her excitement. A man named Angel wondered if he could finally start anew.

And as the morning broke, balmy and clear, there they were: Staff from a collection of groups working to serve the homeless were raising a white canopy a few yards from the double row of tents sheltered beneath I-45. Housing navigators and case managers setting up at tables and folding chairs underneath. A van from Metro that would drive people to a converted hotel, where they'd live until connected with permanent housing, pulling up at the side of the block.

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On [HoustonChronicle.com](#): [After homelessness in Houston: Those who spent time on the streets struggle to adjust to life indoors](#)

Since more than \$65 million in COVID-related funding has poured into Houston and Harris County’s coffers, they have worked in tandem with a number of partners to ramp up the housing units available to move people out of homelessness. As they’ve done so, they’ve picked up the pace at which homeless encampments are being “decommissioned” – the group’s term for offering the residents of a camp permanent housing, then clearing the site, usually with fencing, to prevent the camp from reforming. The process provides a way out of chronic homelessness to the many who choose housing and the services that go with it, a dislocation to the smaller group who do not.

The ultimate success of Houston’s encampment strategy could have rippling effects across the country. Cities including Austin and Dallas are seeking to emulate Houston’s program, said Marc Eichenbaum, special assistant to the mayor for homeless initiatives; others, including Denver and Spokane, Wash. are watching closely.

Tut, an Army veteran who walks with a cane, paused on Tuesday morning outside the encampment, which had already begun to shrink. She smiled. Her eyes crinkled, then

suddenly welled with tears.



Downtown District's cleaning crew clears trash from under I-45 where tents set up by unhoused people were located before getting set up in apartments, Tuesday, Nov. 16, 2021, in Houston.

Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

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“I don’t know why I’m crying,” she said. “They’re doing an awesome job... Change is scary, even if it’s for the good.”

A few yards away, another woman was crying for a different reason. She intended to stay on the street – “Jesus was homeless” – and someone she was close to was readying to go. (She eventually decided to follow.)

Out of the 35 people who were living in the encampment when outreach began, 22 decided to take the offer of housing, according to the Coalition for the Homeless of Houston and Harris County's data. The others simply moved elsewhere. That ratio was a bit unusual, said James Gonzalez, the director overseeing the coalition’s work at the site. The other encampments where the Houston-Harris County Homeless Encampment Response Strategy has been carried out since the beginning of the pandemic saw between 85 and 90 percent of people choose housing, he said.

On [HoustonChronicle.com](#): Harris County, Houston launch \$56 million homeless initiative

Houston, the coalition and their partners began moving people out of encampments in 2018 and has since distilled the process into a manual that has attracted the attention of cities across the nation. Houston, once called out in 2011 by the Department of Housing and Urban Development for the size of its homeless

population, has since more than halved the number of people without homes in Harris and Fort Bend counties to 3,800 in 2020 from 8,500, even as the overall population in those two counties grew 16 percent. For every person housed, taxpayers save approximately \$4,800 because the unhoused population's emergency medical and incarceration costs are so high compared to the cost of housing and supportive services, according to a [2017 study from the National Alliance to End Homelessness](#).

But since 2016, the homeless count in the counties has plateaued. People were becoming homeless as quickly as the Houston area could house them.

Then came COVID – and with it, a sudden influx in funding to help battle the pandemic's health risks to the homeless population. Part of the funds went toward a program renting units from landlords searching for a secure stream of income. The new units, where residents have access to case workers and other services, allowed partnered groups to pick up the pace of moving people out of camps.

Teresa Eddins, a resident on the couch in her room at the city's first Navigation Center, a revamped hotel that temporarily houses homeless displaced from decommissioned tent encampments Friday, Nov. 19, 2021 in Houston, TX. The center provides housing, meals and other social services as the homeless transition from the street to permanent housing.

Michael Wyke / Contributor

The groundwork for moving day at the Pierce and Chenevert streets encampment had started roughly three weeks before. SEARCH, a nonprofit which had already been

doing outreach with the camp, began getting residents comfortable with the idea of moving into housing and drawing up lists of the documents each person needed to get in order before they could apply. Everyone needed an ID, but many had lost theirs or had them stolen; housing programs also need verification of homelessness, and some need a verification of disability. Each document would take time to obtain.

Then, the day people began moving into housing, workers quickly tied yellow numbered tags to the tents, creating a temporary address system of sorts they could use to track who had moved out into housing. Under the white canopy, Steven Dennis sat talking to a housing navigator who filled out paperwork with his income, veteran status and health conditions. When they finished, he leaned back and held his arms up in the air as though crossing a finish line.

"I'm tired," he said, as he swung his messenger bag filled with documents over his shoulder. "I'm excited, too... I'm trying to get my life back."

At the tents, some sat back and watched the proceedings; others sorted through what they wanted to keep, put into storage or throw away. Although a [controversial 2017 Houston ordinance](#) criminalized both camping and possessing too much property in public, those packing said the city had imposed no property limitations on their move. Boots, a fleece hat, deodorants and a portable fan were packed into bags and carried away. After a man walked away from the tent he called home, flashing the

peace symbol at the people who remained, the tent was picked up by a cleaning crew and crunched into the back of a garbage truck.

Eichenbaum said the city plans to clear all of its encampments, but the current bottleneck is housing. “We don’t do this if we don’t have places to put them,” said Ana Rausch, vice president of program operations for the coalition. “There’s no point.”

While the city was able to quickly secure apartments for its program while the need to social distance lowered demand for dense living arrangements, it is now competing with an influx of renters who entered the market as vaccines became widely available this summer. The coalition employs a landlord engagement team which is calling landlords and trying to sell them on the program, in part by dispelling fears of perceived risks (Gonzalez argues that having rent guaranteed and a case worker on hand offers more of a safety net than a landlord has with a normal tenant). Nonetheless, the number of units joining the program have slowed.

Shatina Mcmillian, right, a Harmony House social worker, works with one of the residents at the city's first Navigation Center, a revamped hotel that temporarily houses homeless displaced from decommissioned tent encampments Friday, Nov. 19, 2021 in Houston, TX. The center provides housing, meals and other social services as the homeless transition from the street to permanent housing.

Michael Wyke / Contributor

In response, the city contracted with a hotel to turn it into what it's calling a navigation center – a place where people moved out of an encampment can live, along with pets and loved ones, while they await their permanent housing. (San Francisco pioneered the strategy in 2015.) While the current navigation center is temporary, the city has a plan to build a long-term one in Fifth Ward west of U.S. 59.

Before the coalition and its partners began using COVID funding to move people into housing, it had decommissioned two camps in four years. Since December 2020, they've decommissioned about eight, Rausch said. As of Tuesday, she said the coalition and its partners had moved 134 people into housing out of encampments with COVID funding. The funds have also been used to help more than 5,000 less visible homeless individuals, including people living in shelters or cars.

By noon on Tuesday, the number of tents had fallen by maybe a quarter. The following day, it had dropped another quarter. Some of the people who remained had already taken the bus to check out the navigation center before coming back to finish sorting their things. By Friday, nothing was left but the trenches people living there had dug to channel water away from their tents.

After the coalition and its partners clear a site, their policy is to have the Houston Police Department come by daily to make sure new people do not settle in the space. Those working at the site said they hoped it would eventually be fenced off, as other former camps have been.

An unhoused man tags his belongings before getting transported to an apartment after living in a tent beneath I-45, Tuesday, Nov. 16, 2021, in Houston. Organizations like BakerRipley and the Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County set up canopies and chairs to help unhoused population fill up paperwork for an apartment.

Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

At the Navigation Center on Friday, bags of possessions sat outside waiting to be laundered or placed in a box hot enough to kill any stowaways before coming inside. Case workers sat in the lobby, which residents used as a common area. A snack table laden with cookies, oatmeal and fruit lined the back of the room; board games, magazines and a television were on the other wall. A shipment of frozen meals – fare such as breaded fish with butternut squash – had just arrived.

Outside, Holly Menges walked her puppy, Mexikana, who had her eye infection treated and is now up to date on shots. Joseph Luiz fist pumped Preston Witt, chief services officer of the group running the Navigation Center, then took his bike out for a ride. Teresa Eddins had a smoke, then went back to her room. A garden of palm cuttings and a baby avocado plant grew in Dixie cups along the window.

“When I (first) came in here,” she recalled, sinking into a plush sofa next to a king-sized bed, “I felt like I was in heaven.”

This story has been updated to correct the name of James Gonzalez.

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